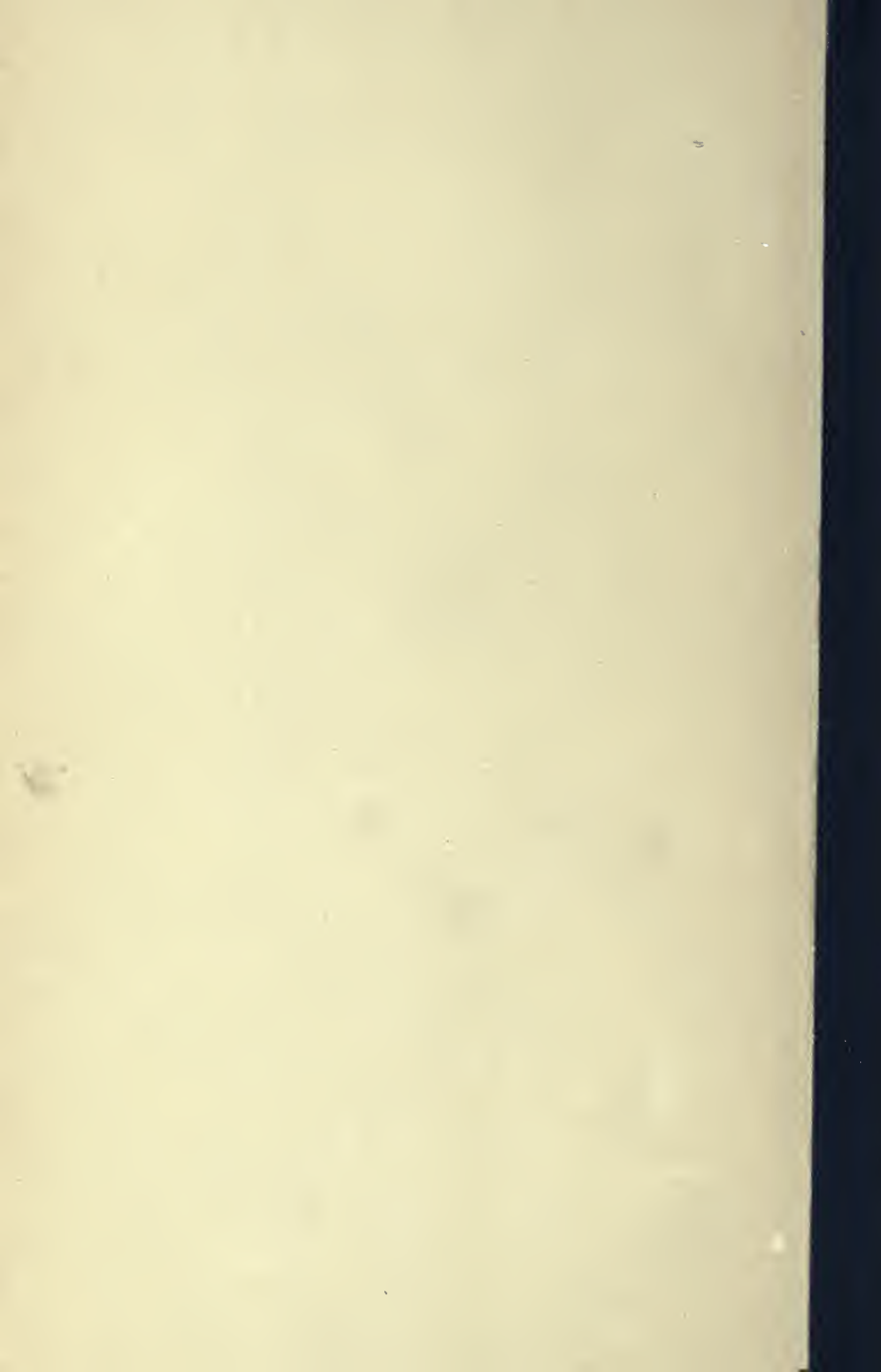
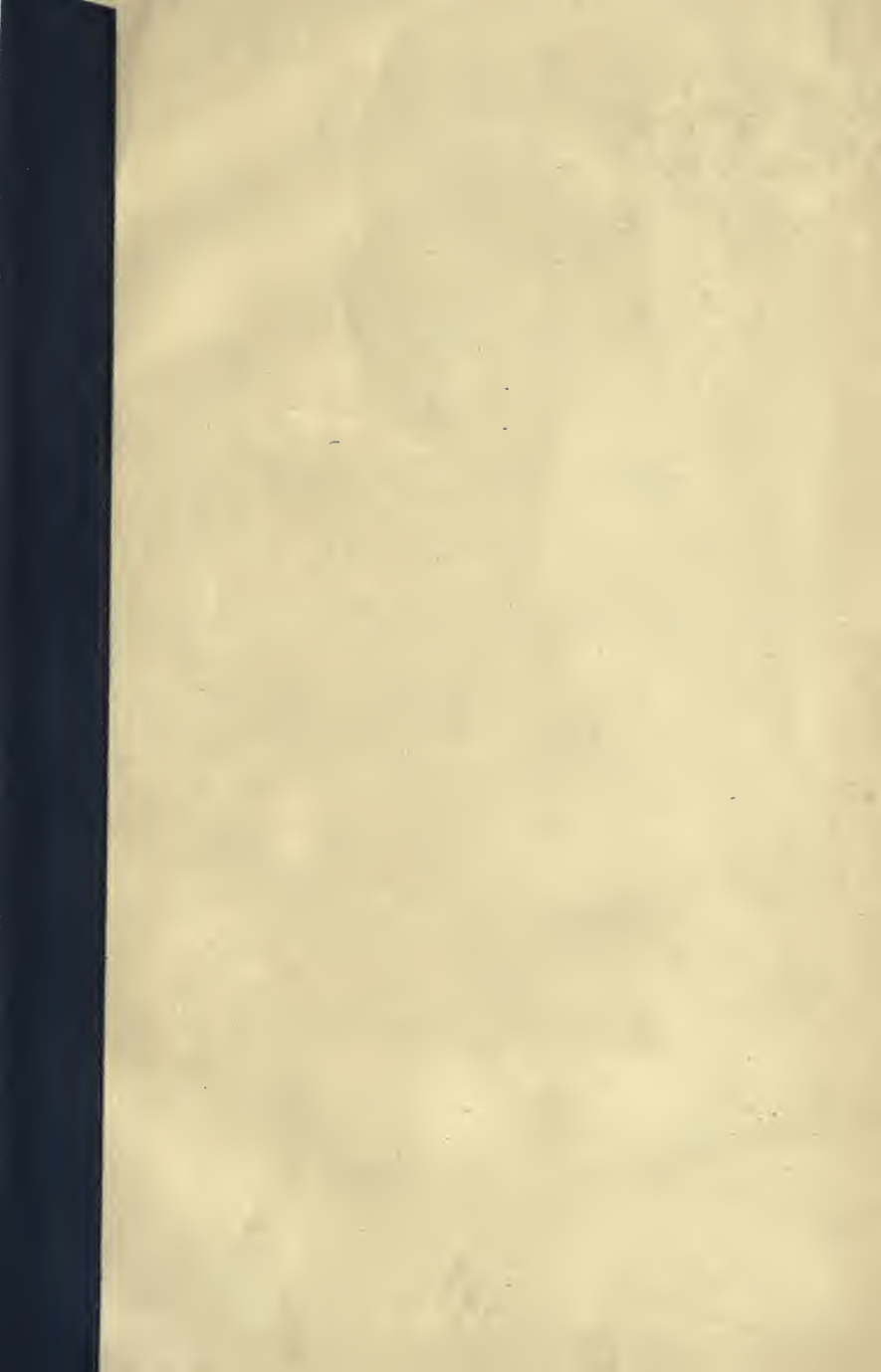


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Lauderdale, James Maitland
Sketch of a petition to
the Commons House ...

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Lauderdale, James
" Maitland, 8th Earl of
(1755 - 1835)

SKETCH
OF A
PETITION
TO THE
COMMONS HOUSE OF PARLIAMENT,
SUBMITTED TO THE CONSIDERATION OF ALL WHO FEEL
FOR THE WELFARE OF THE COUNTRY, OR FOR THE
DISTRESSES OF THE LOWER ORDERS OF THE PEOPLE:

BY THE
EARL OF LAUDERDALE.

[Edinburgh, Moir (pr.)]

1822.

452474
10.10.46

THE

HUMBLE PETITION

Of * * * * *
To * * * * *

SHEWETH,

THAT, whilst your petitioners deeply lament the reduction that has taken place in the wages of commercial, manufacturing, and more particularly of agricultural labour, as well as the consequent distress in which the labourers in these several branches are involved; they feel convinced that no relief can be given to any one branch of industry at the expense of another, without increasing the sufferings even of those whose interest it is intended to promote: and that every arrangement which directly benefits any one class of the community, without injury to any other, must indirectly prove advantageous to all.

That your petitioners, therefore, cannot join in the prayer of any petition, which, imploring freedom of trade in all articles not connected with the public revenue, may be construed into a prayer for keeping up the duties by which manufactures are protected—and repealing the protection afforded by the Legislature to agriculture, as corn is the only article which is protected by regulation.

That, on the same principle, your petitioners are precluded from co-operating with those who, in this moment of distress, have very injudiciously petitioned your Honourable House to adopt measures, which they are wrong in thinking would under all their bearings relieve the agricultural interest, even if they were right in supposing that they would add to the prices of the necessaries of life.

That your petitioners, convinced that perfect freedom from restraint is the means best calculated to give the most advantageous direction to the capital and industry of every country, and to secure to it the greatest possible state of prosperity,—deeply lament the long continued existence of that restrictive, protective, and prohibitory system, which has been for ages sanctioned by the Legislature of this country.

That, nevertheless, your petitioners feel that it is under this system, these kingdoms attained an unparalleled state of prosperity:—and as there are many regimens under which the human frame enjoys perfect health, so your petitioners are convinced that there are many political and commercial arrangements under which a community may enjoy very great prosperity.

That when they, therefore, reflect how much the restrictive and prohibitory system is connected and interwoven by long habit with every branch of our industry, they must deprecate any hasty and inconsiderate dereliction of these our ancient habits by suddenly adopting a new system of commercial regulations, however much it may be more consonant to the sound principles by which the economical policy of a country ought to be regulated.

For your petitioners feel it their duty humbly to state to your Honourable House, that this, a time of deep distress, does not appear to them to be the moment for indulging in experiments; as these, if rashly undertaken, could not fail, from the losses and complaints that would ensue, to bring undeserved discredit upon those liberal doctrines, in which there is at present fortunately so general an acquiescence. They must therefore implore your Honourable House to make no alteration in any part of our legislative code, which affects the agriculture, manufactures, or commerce of the country, without a full investigation of the particular case, and an ample consideration of the remote consequences in relation to

other branches of industry, which cannot fail to ensue under our artificial and complicated system.

That, convinced as your petitioners are of the necessity of extreme caution in the alteration of the laws, relative to any particular branch of industry,—they nevertheless feel it their duty to implore the attention of your Honourable House to one artificial, legislative restraint, on the natural destination of the property of the country, which they sincerely believe is at this moment equally injurious to every class of the community.

That the general distress now existing appears to your petitioners to arise from the low price of commodities, which does not afford sufficient remuneration for the labour of those who are employed in producing them; and, as price depends on the proportion between supply and demand, they are convinced your Honourable House must perceive that this can only be remedied by an increase of demand for the commodities produced. For your petitioners humbly conceive, that the feelings of humanity, which in this country always predominate, must shrink back from the idea of restoring the necessary remunerating value to our commodities by a diminution of supply; an operation that would inevitably occasion the destruction of all that portion of our population employed in the formation of what constitutes the existing extra supply.

That, as the most immediate and effectual means of very greatly encreasing the demand for commodities, and consequently the price thereof, your petitioners humbly request to call the attention of your Honourable House to the salutary effects that would ensue from a suspension of that forced accumulation of capital, which the Legislature enacts by persevering, at this moment, in the appropriation of five millions of our revenue towards a Sinking Fund. For your Honourable House must be fully aware, that there is no portion of the funds so appropriated, which

is not annually raised by taxation, on a people who have been subjected to an increase of taxes unparalleled in rapidity : and that, by persevering in this system of accumulation, you are transferring from the hands of the consumers a portion of their revenues to commissioners, who are bound by law to employ it as capital, whilst, if it had remained in the hands to whom it naturally belonged, it would have been expended in the purchase of consumable commodities ; more particularly at a moment when many of the consumers of this country are deprived of a due supply of the necessaries, and almost all, more or less, of the luxuries which they were accustomed to enjoy.

That, if this practice is persevered in, your petitioners look forward with dismay to the calamity in which the country must be involved; for, if it is true, which all writers on political economy concur in asserting,—That the whole quantity of industry employed to bring any commodity to the market, naturally suits itself to the effectual demand, and constantly aims at bringing the precise quantity thither that is sufficient to supply that demand—it follows, that this diminution of demand, forced by our accumulating fund, must occasion a similar diminution of the productions of the country.

That your petitioners must therefore most seriously conjure your Honourable House, calmly and deliberately to reflect on the consequences of the measures you have pursued and are pursuing.

For twenty-four years, ending the beginning of the year 1819, your Honourable House was pleased, on an average, to raise, by loan or otherwise, twenty-eight millions of the capital of the country, and to sanction the expenditure thereof to meet the demands of the war in which we were so long engaged.

You have seen that this extra expenditure beyond what the revenue naturally afforded, created a formidable increase in the demand for labour;—that a rise in the value of labour ensued,—and that this extend-

ed demand, continued for twenty-four years; created, as must have been expected, an increase of population, such as to adjust the supply of labour to the demand for it.

To your Honourable House, therefore, the consequences of a line of conduct directly the reverse, must be apparent; for twenty-four years you persisted in annually expending a large portion of the capital of the country as revenue; you are now by law forcing a large portion of the revenue to be laid out as capital. By the former line of conduct, you inevitably increased the demand for labour, which, augmenting the wages of labour, encouraged the increase of population;—by adopting the latter system, you must as inevitably diminish the demand for labour, which, by lowering the wages of labour, must devote to starvation that extra population which you have thus incautiously created; forcing them in the mean time to have recourse for sustenance to the miserable pittance afforded by our wretched system of Poor Laws, which is no less ruinous to the property that still remains to the landholder than it is prejudicial to the interests of the fair and honest manufacturer, and destructive of the industry and morals of the lower orders of society.

It is on these grounds your petitioners humbly think it cannot be disputed, by any one who gives a moment's consideration to the subject, that if many of the most oppressive taxes, the produce of which is now applied to this forced accumulation, were repealed, it would contribute to the immediate relief of those who pay them; whilst the expenditure of the funds they are now obliged to deliver over to the commissioners, to be employed as capital, would create such an immediate increase of demand for our commodities in the home market, as, by restoring the due proportion between demand and supply, would greatly contribute towards re-establishing a remunerating price for the labourers of every class of the industrious throughout the community.

That your petitioners humbly beg leave to state to your Honourable House, that this great and beneficial result may be obtained without doing injustice to any class of the community:—for your Honourable House will find, on examination, that the institution of the Sinking Fund was a measure adopted by the Legislature on a belief, which many now think erroneous, that it would be generally advantageous for the public interest, and not with a view to benefit any one particular class of the community. And your Honourable House must be convinced that the stockholders can have no right to claim the continued existence even of a supposed benefit exclusively advantageous to them, at the expense of the rest of the country; when you reflect that great part of the existing debt was contracted by payments made to the public in currency depreciated from 15 to 28 per cent:—whilst by legislative enactment you are now paying the interest upon the capital so advanced, in the standard coin of these realms.

That your petitioners, however, do not wish to disguise from your Honourable House, that they never have been able to convince themselves of the wisdom or policy of a country, under any circumstances, directing by law, that a large portion of its revenue should be converted into capital, which is the means now resorted to for establishing a Sinking Fund.—For your petitioners must think, that, in the early stages of such an institution, it diminishes the demand for consumable commodities, by devoting a share of the revenue, which would naturally be expended in the encouragement of industry, to the absurd purpose of reducing the nominal amount of a debt, of which it annually augments the real value in an alarming proportion. Yet that this is the effect of the Sinking Fund, your Honourable House must at once be convinced, by comparing an account of the total amount of the unredeemed debt on the 1st of January in each year, from the year 1787 to the year 1792, with an account

of the actual money value of the national debt, calculated according to the price of stock at these respective periods.—Your petitioners must also submit to your Honourable House, that it is a system which, when persevered in for a length of time, arms the Government with a dangerous power over the public creditor,—of the truth of which proposition, if your Honourable House is not convinced by the recent proposal of reducing the 5 per cents to 4 per cents, your petitioners must humbly refer you to the history of our finance, where you will learn, that a reduction was effected in the interest of the public debt in the year 1727, from 5 per cent. to 4 per cent. and afterwards in the years 1749 and 50, from 4 per cent. to 3 per cent. by a continued perseverance in this system.

Your petitioners, therefore, must humbly submit to your Honourable House, that a Sinking Fund at all times necessarily operates as an engine, by which some portion of the community are defrauded of their property. In its early existence it takes, by taxation, money out of the pockets of the people, under pretence of discharging a debt, which, in reality, it augments; and when arrived at maturity, it furnishes the means of depriving of their revenue the public creditors, for whose benefit it is said to be established, committing in its progress licensed depredations on the property of individuals, which, though not apparent to the unwary, are of a magnitude infinitely greater than any the law punishes by the forfeiture of existence.

That waving, for the present, all further discussion of these more abstract and general principles, on the soundness of which your petitioners, however, do not entertain a doubt, they must humbly repeat to your Honourable House that this is a moment of unprecedented distress, from want of demand for those commodities on the formation of which the existence of a considerable part of the population of this country depends;—they indeed, in conjunction with many

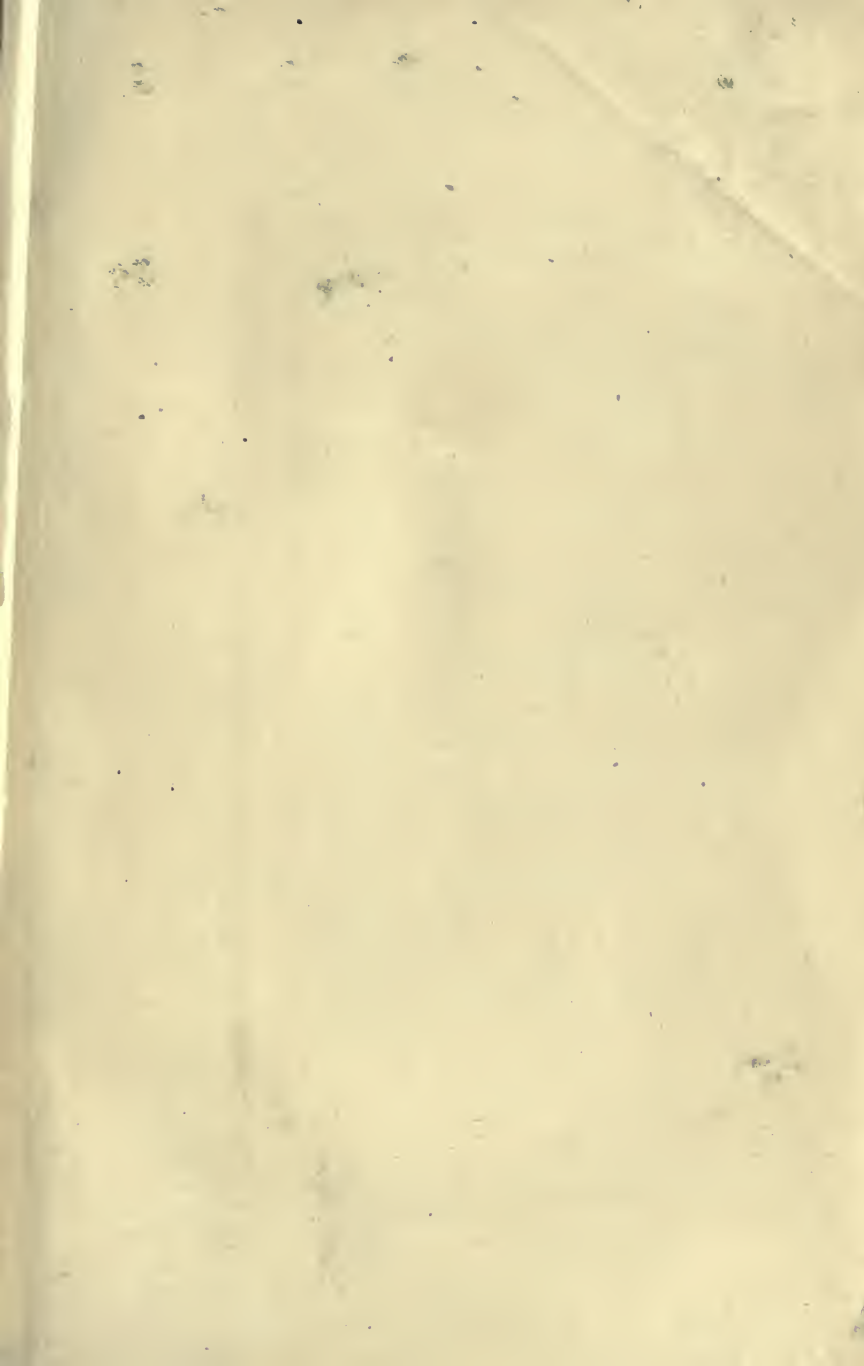
others, are sanguine that great benefit will be derived from the operation of time, when property becomes fixed in the hands in which it is placed by the new distribution, to which the enormous expenditure of our war has given rise.

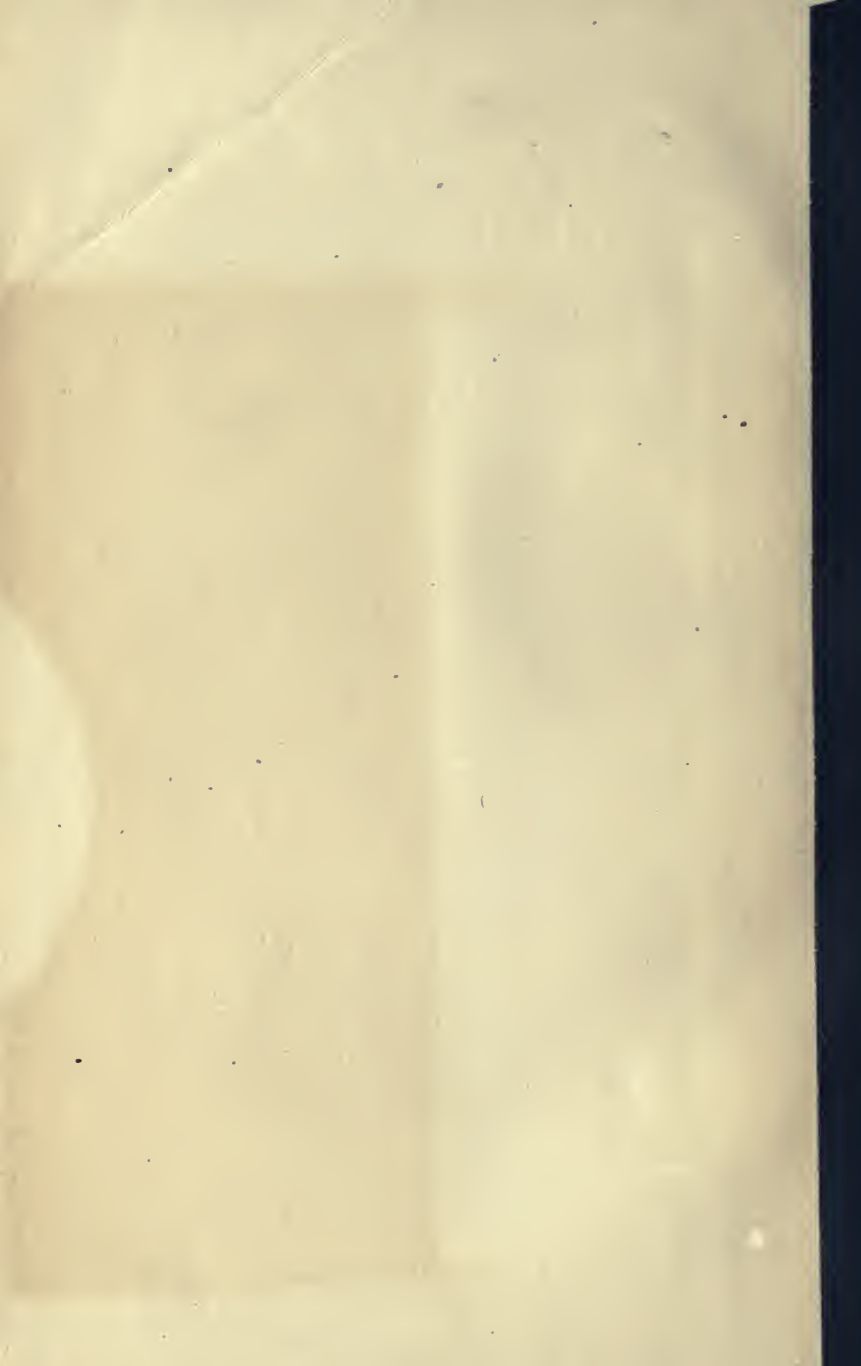
Nevertheless, it appears to your petitioners, and they trust it will appear to your Honourable House, and to the community at large, highly inexpedient; to abstract, at this moment, five millions of revenue from expenditure, with a view to accumulate it into capital, for the benefit of posterity; who, it is confidently believed, will exist in times when an increased demand may have relieved the community from that state of distress, in which it is now involved:—for your petitioners are convinced that there is not a Member of your Honourable House, who would not conceive an individual, possessing a revenue capable, during a famine, of purchasing food sufficient to sustain himself and those dependent upon him, to be insane, if he allowed himself and his family to perish, rather than submit to break in upon the sum he was annually in the habit of accumulating for his posterity:—yet it is with deep regret your petitioners perceive that this is the line of conduct which the legislature of this country, bound to protect the public by the same ties that a father is bound to protect his family, is at this moment pursuing.

That your petitioners are perfectly aware that your Honourable House, in the year 1819, resolved, “ That
 “ to provide for the exigencies of the public service,
 “ to make such progressive reduction of the national
 “ debt as may adequately support public credit, and
 “ to afford the country a prospect of future relief
 “ from a part of its present burdens, it is absolutely
 “ necessary that there should be a clear surplus of the
 “ income of the country, beyond the expenditure, of
 “ not less than L.5,000,000; and that with a view to
 “ the attainment of this important object, it is expedient now, to increase the income of the country,

“ by the imposition of taxes, to the amount of “ L.3,000,000 per annum.” It is indeed from the knowledge that this resolution stands recorded on the Journals of your Honourable House, that your petitioners are encouraged to look forward with sanguine hopes of the success of this their humble petition. Your petitioners have long remarked with admiration the uniform consistency which distinguishes the proceedings of your Honourable House. They cannot, therefore, doubt that your Honourable House will listen with a favourable ear to their humble request, when they reflect that they are only imploring your Honourable House to shew the same marked and equally well merited respect to this resolution, which, by passing the Act of the 59th George III. chap. 49. commonly called Mr Peel’s Bill, your Honourable House was in its wisdom pleased to display for the opinion recorded in your Journals on the motion of his Majesty’s Chancellor of Exchequer : “ That “ the promisory-notes of the Bank of England were, “ on the 15th May 1811, and had hitherto been held “ in public estimation to be, equivalent to the legal “ coin of the realm.”

Your petitioners therefore humbly implore your Honourable House to take into your immediate consideration the propriety of suspending the operation of the Sinking Fund, by repealing taxes to the amount of Five Millions, the sum now appropriated for accumulation; by the judicious performance of which duty your petitioners are convinced that you will afford great relief to many classes of the lower orders of society, and general advantage to all, resulting from the expenditure of that portion of the revenue now devoted to accumulation, in the purchase of commodities of our produce and manufactures, to which it would naturally be appropriated, if not forcibly converted into capital by legislative interference.





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